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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Buddy Program for international teaching assistants (ITAs) at Michigan State University (MSU) in East Lansing and presents brief case studies of the program in action. The Buddy Program pairs new ITAs with undergraduates at MSU to help familiarize ITAs with student life at the school and help them assimilate into their new role as teaching assistants. Over the course of 8 weeks the ITA-undergraduate pairs spend about 25 hours together and share life stories, visit student residences and classrooms, and explore such topics as student employment, student academic decision making, extracurricular activities, how students study, teacher-student interaction, and optional topics. Vignettes illustrate how ITAs come to appreciate the differences and similarities between student life at MSU and in their home countries. (MDM)

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Cultural Support for International TAs: An Undergraduate Buddy Program

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Good morning, this is the session "Cultural Support for International TAs: An Undergraduate Buddy Program." I'm one of the copresenters, Bill Rittenberg, and this is my colleague and copresenter, Zeynep Altinsel.

Today, we'd like to share the results of a two-year project at Michigan State designed to provide cultural support for new international TAs. The purpose of the project, called the 'ITA Buddy Program,' is to increase international TAs' understanding of their undergraduate students. The program is funded by MSU's Provost's Office and thus far has served 40 new international TAs.

Each year, MSU has about 100 new international TAs. As you can see from the flow chart (pg. 8), before Fall semester begins, the new ITAs are required to attend a week-long campus orientation and to take the SPEAK English screening test. The largest group, sixty percent or more, passes SPEAK (with a score of at least 230) and is cleared for teaching. The others either must retest on SPEAK or they must take a special English class and pass an exit interview before they're cleared for teaching.

Until recently, once the new ITAs had finished the orientation and cleared the English requirement, there was no followup support to help them deal with cultural factors as they were actually teaching. The Buddy Program was created two years ago (1994) to fill this gap.

The key idea behind the program is to intensify and accelerate the normal process by which international TAs learn about their undergraduate students. When newcomers come to live and work in a new culture, they naturally learn about aspects of the culture and how to function in it through their daily participation. For ITAs, this process naturally includes some learning about undergraduate students. The new ITAs learn about undergrads through direct interaction and in many other ways while participating in campus life.

The problem with ITAs' normal process of learning about undergrads, however, is first that it's often very slow, and second that the quality of the learning is uneven. How much the ITAs learn depends upon the richness and scope of the ITAs' exposure to students, which of course varies tremendously. So, our strategy in the Buddy Program is to intensify the ITAs' contact with the students, and by doing that, to speed up the informal learning process and deepen it. We do this by pairing individual ITAs with an undergraduate buddy, by supporting the ITA and undergrad in developing a personal relationship, and by engaging the pair of buddies together in a guided observational study of undergraduate life at MSU. In effect, the undergraduate buddy serves as the ITA's guide in exploring student life on campus.

The program's approach to helping ITAs learn more about their students, there, is neither didactic instruction nor formal training exercises, but rather this process of guided naturalistic observation and discovery that the buddies do together.

Now, I'd like to turn the baton over to Zeynep and she'll describe for you more fully what's involved in this buddy program and the what kind of benefits we find the ITAs gain from it.

PARTICIPANTS AND ACTIVITIES

To participate in the Buddy Program, ITAs must have cleared the university English requirement and started teaching. Before being accepted, they also must commit to participate fully in the program. The TAs' participation is free and voluntary. The undergraduate buddies come from many backgrounds. Most of them have already shown an interest in international TAs and have a connection with the TA Program. The undergrads are paid for their participation, which usually amounts to about 25 hours or \$125.

Table 2 (pg. 9) gives information about the ITAs and undergraduate buddies who have participated in the program so far. As you can see, it's a very diverse group, both of ITAs and undergrads.

Table 3 (pg. 10) outlines the Buddies' program of activities. The program lasts a total of eight weeks. For each week except the last one the Buddy pairs have an assigned topic or aspect of student life to explore together. The sequence of topics moves roughly from conditions of student life outside the classroom to observation of classroom interaction itself. The early activities support the buddies in developing a friendship. Later ones encourage them to combine and synthesize what they have learned together. For each week there is an activity sheet which provides a framework in which they can explore the week's topic (see **Table 4** for an example, pg. 11). While providing some guidance, the sheets leaves each pair of buddies free to explore the topic in their own way.

An essential adjunct to the buddies' weekly activities are regular small group discussions with a TA Program staff member. The ITAs meet with a staff member once every two weeks to discuss what they are learning about the undergrads, while the undergrads meet weekly to discuss what they have learned about the TAs. All buddies (undergraduates and TAs) are also expected to give us a brief journal about their weekly activities.

In the first weekly meeting, the buddy pairs begin to get acquainted by exchanging life stories. They talk about their countries, schools, families, etc, and discover both similarities and differences in the backgrounds, having grown up in different countries.

During the second week, in order to learn about where and how MSU students live, they visit an undergrad dorm or the undergrad buddy's residence. ITAs see a dorm room, may meet roommates, tour the facilities and sometimes eat at the cafeteria.

The next week, in order to learn about some of MSU students' many commitments outside of class, they visit the undergrad buddy's place of employment or the place of employment of one of the buddy's friends. They discuss the importance of jobs in MSU students' lives, both financially and for students' future careers.

In week four, the theme is how MSU students make academic decisions. These are decisions about entering a university, selecting a major, and choosing classes. The two buddies compare how they made such decisions in different countries, and in the process the TA gains insights into how the MSU system differs from the TA's university and how it influences students' academic motivation and classroom behavior.

In week 5, the theme is students' extracurricular activities and recreation at MSU. The buddies may visit the Student Union or the athletic facilities and discuss how students balance a busy schedule of social activities with their study.

Weeks 6 and 7 involve a discussion of how MSU students study and either a trip to observe one of the UG's classes together or a meeting to watch and discuss a video of an UG class and discuss student behavior.

In the final week, each pair of buddies picks their own topic to explore. At this stage, buddies who have developed a good relationship feel comfortable in discussing quite sensitive subjects together -- for instance, issues in personal relationships, race and diversity.

FRIENDLY RELATIONSHIPS

We have found that the undergraduate buddies learn at least as much from this program as the ITAs. Actually, we can't overemphasize the program's value for undergraduate buddies. Today, however, we'll focus only on the benefits for the ITAs.

The first benefit of the program for ITAs is that they develop a friendly personal relationship with an undergraduate student. As **Table 5** shows (pg. 12), almost all of the 40 ITAs who have participated in the program so far developed good or excellent relationships with their buddies. Only two of the pairs had some interpersonal trouble in their relationship, and only three relationships were interrupted before finishing by outside factors like sickness or too much academic work.

Lisa and Chen's story illustrates how the buddy relationships may develop over time. Chen was a new Chem TA from China and Lisa was a junior in international relations from Michigan. In Lisa's journal from their first meeting, she noted that Chen seemed distant. "It was hard to read him," she wrote, his "facial expressions didn't give much away." Some other buddies make similar comments about the beginning meeting -- that it seemed stiff or formal, that they were concerned about bridging the gap. Early on, a number of the undergraduate buddies also mentioned that their ITAs didn't talk much. This occurred especially in cross-gender pairs. Being from a very different background, the male ITA might have been unsure about what topics would be appropriate to pick and discuss with an American female undergraduate. It was also a new experience for most of the international TAs to use English in developing a personal relationship.

Some occasional stiffness toward the beginning of the relationships seems natural. Over time, however, the buddies become more comfortable with each other. In their weekly meetings, they develop many shared experiences they can talk about; they learn a great deal about each others' backgrounds and develop a 'feel' for being together. The journals contain many signs that the relationships open up. Lisa, for example, wrote that her meetings with Chen got "a lot less low keyed than before" and that he was "posing more direct questions." Other undergrads also mentioned that the ITAs began talking more. Many buddies became comfortable talking freely on a wide range of topics. They discussed some quite sensitive issues.

By the end of the program, many buddies had achieved, perhaps for the first time, an "open channel" of communication with a person from another culture. The ITAs expressed genuine interest in finding out what their undergraduate buddies really were thinking. The undergrads too expressed satisfaction. "I was excited," one wrote, "he opened up a lot more than I thought. I'm glad we weren't intimidated to ask each other questions." As the relationships unfolded, many of the buddies also began introducing each other to friends, spouses, and family. This was what happened for Lisa and Chen. By the end of the program, they had both introduced each other to their spouse or fiancée, and the couples were meeting socially. Lisa and her fiancée wrote "We enjoy the friendship. I think they do too." Speaking of their relationship Chen and his wife told us with enthusiasm "We have friends now!"

Developing their first personal relationship with an American undergraduate student is an important step for the new international TAs. For most of the ITAs, their first and only full relationship with an undergrad is the one with their buddy. For some, this is also the first relationship they have had with a person from another culture. The successful buddy relationships help dispel ITAs' uncertainties and build their confidence. It strengthens their sense of connection to the MSU students, and helps them feel part of the university community. A number of the ITAs said that this increased confidence would make them more comfortable in their teaching.

NEW UNDERSTANDINGS

The second benefit of the program for ITAs is developing a fuller understanding of undergraduate students. This happens through the relationship with their buddy.

At the opening of the program, the ITAs will already have some opinions and ideas about MSU students, which may come from friends or media or from their experience teaching in the classroom. In some cases, such ideas about the students may be rather sketchy, because they are not based on much experience.

Then, in each of the weekly activities with their buddy, and in the small group discussions, the ITAs gain a wealth of new information about student life. How do the ITAs make sense of the new information and what kind of understandings do they develop from it? Here are some observations and examples, based on the ITAs' comments in their journals and small group discussions.

A first observation is that as the weekly activities occur, individual ITAs will notice some things that immediately stand out. Most often, these are aspects of undergraduate life that are strikingly different from what the ITA has experienced as a student at home. A first type of learning in the program occurs when ITAs reflect on and draw lessons from these striking new facts that they have encountered.

Example #1

One example concerns a computer science TA from China, who had participated in the Buddy Program the semester after he had arrived from China and taught his first computer science lab with MSU students. In China, this TA said, students with the same major live together in the same residence hall and attend the same classes together throughout their undergraduate study, so they naturally develop close relationships and help each other. In the week of visiting his Buddy's residence hall, the TA discovered that MSU arrangements are very different. To his surprise and distress, during the visit to the hall, he found the students at the hall did not all share the same major or take the same classes together as they would in China. Immediately the TA remembered an incident with a confused female computer science student who had come to ask him for help with the course material. Assuming that his class consisted solely of students who were computer science majors and lived together, as in China, he refused to answer her questions and told her she should get help from her classmates. Now he realized, in fact, that his student didn't live with her classmates, might not know even know them, and couldn't easily get help from them. In his journal he called it a "concerning experience" to see that he had refused her legitimate request for help. In the future, with his new understanding, the TA would be able to respond more effectively to such students' needs.

Example #2

In a second case, an ITA was quite surprised to learn how hard his buddy and his buddy's friend studied. Reflecting on this, the ITA wrote in his journal

"Many people told me most /MSU/ students are either lazy or busy with part time jobs. They only study during the finals week. I found this is not the case. Most American students I know ... study very hard."

Like the first example, this one also illustrates how ITAs notice surprising individual facts during the weekly activities and then draw lessons from them that influence the ITAs' assumptions and practical approach to their students.

A second aspect of the ITAs' learning is how the ITAs are able to integrate many separate piece of information and facts from the program into new patterns of understanding about MSU students. The required journals and small group discussions systematically encourage the ITAs to seek connections between facts and do this work of integration.

Example #3

Consider a journal entry by Mr. Wu from the fourth week of the program. In this week the buddies meet to discuss students' academic decision making -- how students enter the university and choose a major. In the discussion, Mr. Wu got new insight into how many academic choices MSU students have and he put this information together with what he knew about China to arrive at a new understanding of the students' academic situation.

In China, Wu noted, students have to pass strict university entrance exams and are admitted into a particular major where their curriculum of study is almost completely fixed. "You have few choices," he wrote. "It's difficult to change to another major. So [Chinese] students have to focus their attention in one major. ... because they have no choice, they study and improve their background in that area."

In contrast at MSU, he wrote, " ... because there are no strict [university entrance] exams to test basic subjects MSU students [have] diverse backgrounds. ... Because making change is very easy here, you can change your major, drop course, and take another course." "Sometimes ... [students] ... change to a major just because they like it or heard from friends, some of their friends like and they take. These give rise to a problem that they are not very well prepare to take these courses. They don't have good background."

"Being a TA, we sometimes shouldn't expect /as in China/ that every student taking the courses have solid background. Making change is very easy here.... We should know the facts and be prepared for these possible difficulties."

Here Wu put together a lot of information into new understanding that will help him practically in relating to his students in the classroom. Not surprisingly, journal entries and group discussions which express such integrated understandings of cultural differences occur more frequently later in the program.

A final aspect of the ITAs' learning that we would like to mention concerns the ITAs' personal appreciation of their buddy, and by extension, their personal appreciation of other MSU undergraduates. Most of the ITAs like and are curious about their buddies at a personal level. As they get new information about their buddy, they naturally combine it with what they already know to understand their buddy better. Gradually, they develop a complex personal understanding of a particular student in his or her context. They see the student's character, the typical aspects of the student's situation as a student, and the student's struggles in that situation. With that rich understanding of one student, they can make further leaps to understand other students as well.

This is perhaps the most encouraging result we have found from the Buddy Program. It arises from the combination of the TAs' friendly relationship with a particular student and their fuller background of understandings about the conditions of student life. What we notice is that TAs develop a new sympathetic appreciation of the students' typical struggles and stresses. While the ITAs might not approve of all aspects of the students' situation in the American system, we find they still develop a measure of personal respect for the students for coping with it. The respect and understanding the ITAs develop arises from the work they do in their relationship with their buddy, and is truly their own -- it's not something an expert authority told them, or moral advice from a book, but an understanding they created for themselves. This is discovery learning. Having created it for themselves, we think the TAs probably trust it and take it more seriously than simple 'book learning' about cultural differences.

THREE STORIES

To illustrate the themes we've mentioned, here we have three stories to tell you. We'll share what these three pairs of buddies had in their journals on what they learned and how they felt.

#1

The first story is about Shu-Wei, a female, Chinese TA in Chemistry, and Sue, a mature freshman student from Michigan. Though Wei and Sue completed all the assigned activities, they didn't have a very close relationship -- we rated it as good, not as excellent, in Figure 4. Still, Wei told us she had learned a lot from the program, and she demonstrated her appreciation by sending her husband, a Math TA, to participate the next semester. Before the Buddy Program, she had had a volunteer undergraduate English tutor, but she felt that she learned much more about MSU students through her relationship with Sue in the Buddy Program. Some of her comments from the exit questionnaire at the end of the program:

The first thing that changed my assumption is the students' study habit. Before I talked to Sue, I thought the American students often study by group, and often ask help from TA or professor. But Sue studies in her dorm and by herself, and she doesn't always ask help from TAs or professors.

The second thing that surprised me is too much work that students have to do, such as Sue's boyfriend, he need work all the weekend for about nine or ten hours for one day, because he need earn money to pay his tuition and livings. This totally different from me. When I was in the college, I didn't need work, the government paid me tuition and my parent payed my livings. When I didn't have money, I can ask my parent help me. The independent of American student is too strong to believe for my background.

Also, in the final speeches to other buddies at the program's closing potluck dinner, Wei repeated again to the whole group that she had changed her understanding of undergraduate students.

#2

The second story is about Hamid, a new TA from Ethiopia, whose buddy Mark was a very intelligent and curious junior student in International Relations. Hamid had an extremely busy first semester at MSU and had missed most of the buddy group meetings during the program. We only learned what he gained from the program during our exit interview at the end. He said he was happy to have participated. Though participation had been very hectic for him personally, he still said he believed that the new TAs should be in the program in their first semester. Here are some of our notes on his comments:

Looking back on the program, Hamid ranked the seventh week on "TA-student interaction" as the best activity. He and his buddy had watched and discussed a videotape showing a freshman algebra class complaining about a test to their TA. Hamid was so surprised by the students' behavior that he asked us whether the taped events had really happened. We said, yes, the tape was of an actual class at MSU. Hamid said "Watching the class complain about the test was very helpful." It could help him prepare mentally and avoid "being trapped" if one of his classes became very critical of the test or his instruction. He observed, in the taped class it wasn't just one student who complained but they all complained together. Hamid said that would NEVER happen in Ethiopia. He said the students at home might compare their scores and try to figure out what the more successful students had done and try to learn from their success, but they would NEVER question the legitimacy of the exam. Still, Hamid wasn't negative about the MSU students' behavior. He had a more balanced, sympathetic attitude. He seemed to accept "this is the way students sometimes behave here," and his interest was "how can I respond effectively if this should happen to me." Hamid said the Buddy Program had shown him how much pressure and difficulty the students face, working, with other assignments, so he could appreciate why students might complain.

#3

The final story comes from Mali, an Indian Computer Science TA, and Jane, an MSU senior in International Relations. They had an excellent relationship. They enjoyed each other's company a lot and their activities were not limited by the program. They even visited Jane's high school in her home town. The visit made a big impression on Mali. Mali was teaching for the first time that

semester and trying to deal with some cultural problems in her classroom. The program came probably at the right time for her.

After the student workplace activity, Mali's comments were, "It's really hard to work and study. It made me realize they are not spending their whole time on studying, which is what we do in India. They have a lot of work. It's a good thing to understand and see what they are going through doing studies. But they seem to be having a lot of fun."

When the two buddies went to an international relations and discussion class, Mali seemed to be very impressed with the students' behavior in the discussion. Here is an excerpt from her journal comments:

"I really enjoyed the undergraduate class. Jane and I went together. I expected everyone to sit and listen to the prof and not talk. If you see one class, you know how it goes, you feel more comfortable. Any undergraduate class. It was so casual, I liked it. I think TAs should also attend some different class, not [just] in computer science department."

She also noticed a new method of teaching: "Teaching is different here. In India they teach the book."

The most useful observation personally for her was on the student behavior in the classroom. She said when she had started teaching, she felt the MSU students were not respectful to the teachers. At the end of the class visit with Jane she said

"I understand how the education system is. People are casual." and she went on saying "Drinking cola, chewing gum doesn't mean that they are disrespectful. I take student behavior personally. That's so true. We get hurt."

The behavior that would have been disrespectful in her culture had hurt her. At the end of the program, she said she felt friendlier and more confident going to her class.

* * * * *

These are a few examples from the program. We wish we could share others, but we want to leave some time for questions.

Seen from a university wide standpoint, we think the undergraduate buddies provide a realistic cultural learning experience for the international TAs. They also give the ITAs a lot of personal attention and support. Such a learning opportunity and support would be much more expensive if it came from paid professional staff.

From the undergraduates' standpoint, the buddy relationship is a very rich one. For about half of the undergrads, this is their first full personal relationship with a person from another culture. It made a big impression on some undergrads to talk with someone whom they have grown to like who has very different beliefs than they do. Another benefit for the undergrads, who are mostly juniors and seniors, and thinking about their future careers, is to hear about the ITA's high accomplishments and discipline as graduate students. The undergrads are impressed, sometimes inspired, hearing how hard the ITAs work and what they accomplish. So the ITAs become role models too. The undergrads also go through a change in their attitude to common student complaints about "the foreign TA problem." They become critics of their friends' narrow views and defenders of the ITAs.

It's been an enriching experience for us working on the buddy program. As you can imagine there have been many practical challenges in making the program work. So now, we would be happy to take any of your questions about the practical matters or anything else anyone would like to bring up about the program. Thank you very much for your attention. Are there any questions?

Table 1
MSU Services for International TAs

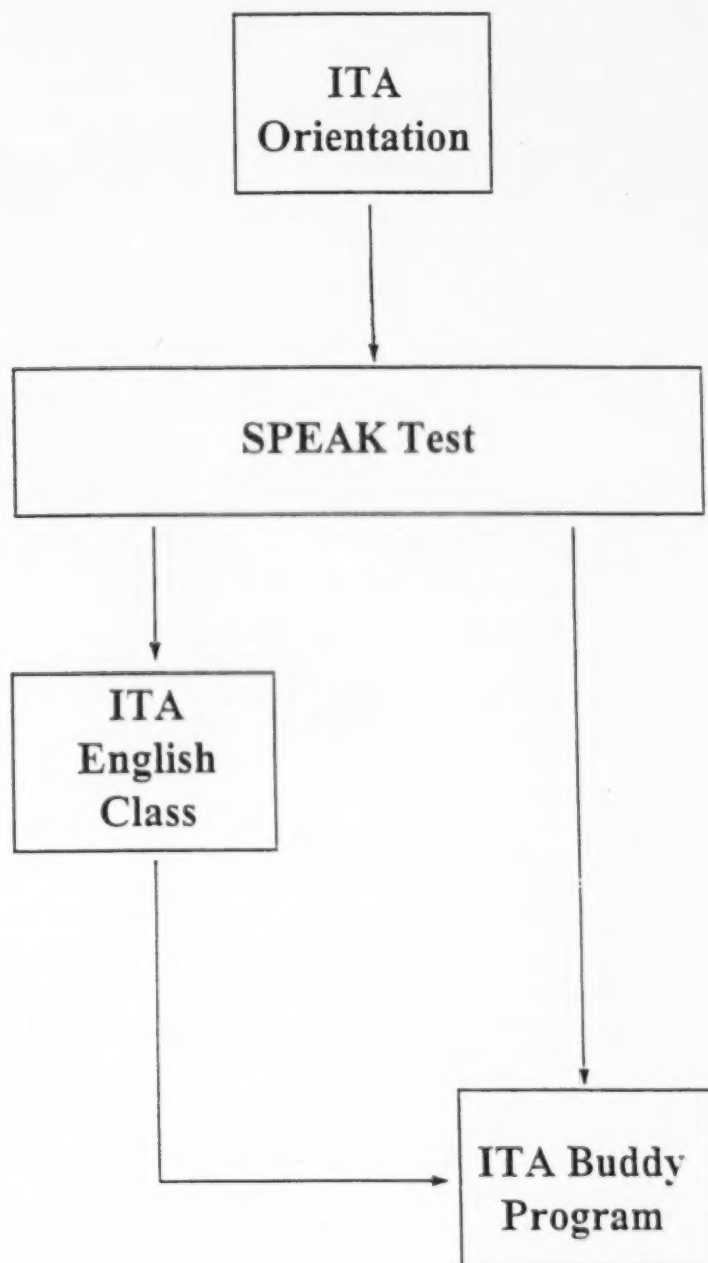


Table 2
Buddy Program Participants

International TAs (N = 40)

Countries		Departments		Gender	
PRC	21	Chemistry	10	Female	13
India	6	Comp Sci	9	Male	27
Korea	2	Math	6		
Phil	2	Biochem	3		
Taiwan	2	Microbiol	2		
Romania	1	Psychol	2		
Bulgaria	1	Botany	1		
Ethiopia	1	Economics	1		
Germany	1	English	1		
Grt Brit	1	Geog	1		
Turkey	1	Mat Sci	1		
		Sociology	1		
		Statistics	1		

Undergraduates (N = 29)

Class Standing		Gender		Recruitment		Majors	
Senior	15	Female	24	Eng Tutor	10	Int Rel	5
Junior	11	Male	5	Tutor's Friend	8	Audiology	5
Soph	2			Ind Study	5	Social Rel	3
Fresh	1			Orientation	4	Anthro	2
				Intern	1	Comm Arts	2
						Physiol	2
						Bus Adm	1
						English	1
						Journalism	1
						Lingusitics	1
						Marketing	1
						Med Tech	1
						Psychology	1
						Sociology	1
						Telecomm	1

Table 3
Buddy Program Activities

Opening	--	Orientation
Week 1	--	Sharing Life Stories
Week 2	--	Student Residence
Week 3	--	Student Employment
Week 4	--	Academic Decision Making
Week 5	--	Extracurricular Activities
Week 6	--	How Students Study
Week 7	--	Student/Teacher Interaction
Week 8	--	Optional Topic (Buddies' Choice)
Wrap Up	--	Closing Potluck

Table 4

Student Workplace

The majority of MSU Undergraduate students work while they take classes. It may be different in the TAs' countries. The students may not have to work to pay for school and can concentrate only on school work. For this week's discussion, you will be visiting the undergraduate's workplace and have a chance to discuss how working affects their academic study.

TAs, think about some questions before you meet your buddy. As you learn about the UG's job, compare it to student life in your own country. Get ready to discuss the way students relate to work at your university. Remember we would like the TAs to share their background and views on these issues with the undergrads.

Tour of Workplace

Undergrads, take the TA to your workplace.

Show the environment you work in. Introduce your buddy to your coworkers.

Talk about what you do. For instance, your responsibilities, how many hours you work, how you found the job.

As you tour, answer the questions about things that your buddy notices and is curious about.

Have some time after the tour to discuss further and also listen to how things are in the TAs country and his/her comments.

Discussion about MSU Undergraduates

Undergraduate buddy - Why do you work? (for the income, job experience). Is the job experience important for your career goals? What are some of the other reasons students work? (internships, volunteer work)

What other jobs have you personally had before this one? What off-campus jobs do students get (clerical jobs, restaurants, sales positions)? Where can students work on campus? (residence halls, academic departments, labs, library). How do they find jobs? Where are the jobs posted?

In your opinion, does working interfere or contribute to students' learning? How does work affect your study?

Discussion about TA's Country

TAs, what is the situation regarding work for students in your country? Have you had a job while you were in school? Where? Do students work in your country? Why?

How would people in your country feel about how working would affect a university student's education?

Table 5
TA/Buddy Relationships

	Excellent	Good/OK	Trouble
Completed Full Program	26	10	1
Stopped Before Completing Full Program	2	-	1